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Omega 7's Killers Strike in New York

Felix García Rodríguez, a low-ranking aide at the Cuban mission to the United Nations in New York, was driving through Queens early one evening last week in his maroon Pontiac station wagon. Suddenly, shots were fired from a nearby car. García was hit by two bullets, one below his left ear and one above it, and died instantly—the first U.N. diplomat ever assassinated on the streets of New York. About ten minutes later, a Hispanic-sounding man called several news organizations, claiming that the assassination had been carried out by Omega 7—a violently anti-Castro group of Cubans that the FBI has labeled the most dangerous terrorist organization operating in the United States.

Spree: It was the second murder in a year laid to Omega 7, which has also claimed to have set off at least twenty bombs in the past five years—five of them in attacks on the Cuban U.N. mission and one against the Soviet mission. The FBI feared that last week's shooting might launch a new spree of violence, and officials worried about the possible international implications of the murder. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie expressed "deep regret" over the slaying and promised a "vigorous investigation." U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim denounced the killing as "a wanton act of terrorism," and both the FBI and New York police pledged tighter security for diplomats. The official Cuban newspaper Granma, meanwhile, charged that the terrorists acted with "impunity," and the Soviet news agency Tass propagandized that the murder was accomplished with the "full connivance" of American authorities.

Justice Department officials believe that Omega 7 draws its membership from the Cuban Nationalist Movement, an above-ground anti-Castro group with headquarters in Miami and in Union City, N.J. Some of its leaders are CIA-trained Bay of Pigs veterans who are still dedicated to the overthrow of the Castro regime. Three CNM members are now in prison in connection with the assassination of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier in Washington four years ago. Two others were charged in that case but remain fugitives; they are also wanted for questioning in a 1979 bombing at Kennedy airport, for which Omega 7 claimed responsibility. Earlier this year, after police found a bomb outside the residence of Cuba's U.N. Ambassador

Raúl Roa Kourí, the Federal government began a grand-jury investigation of CNM and Omega 7. One key line of questioning: does the movement extort money from local businessmen or receive aid from foreign and domestic organizations?

The leader of the New Jersey branch of the CNM is Armando Santana, 29, who once served a jail sentence for placing a bomb in front of a New York theater where a pro-Castro festival was to be held. In an interview with NEWSWEEK last year, Santana explained the group's objective. "We should be rulers of our own destiny," he said. "Cuba has never been free. We are not looking to turn the clock back to Batista. We're not Western oriented and do not look to the Soviet mode. We're looking for a new, third position." Santana refused to confirm or deny any connection with Omega 7, but last week CNM member Alfredo Chumaceiro insisted that "there is no connection" between the movement and García's assassination.

Efforts to crack the terrorist ring are hampered by the support CNM receives within the passionately anti-Castro Cuban community of Union City. "I know nothing about the assassination or Omega 7, but it's OK with me," said businessman Guido Guirado. "We cooperate with the movement freely. Any penny we have we happily give to them," added his wife, Felicia, sister of one of the Letelier fugitives. The hard-line Cuban nationalists reject any attempt to deal with Castro. Omega 7's activities picked up sharply after a group of Cuban moderates, called the Committee of 75, began dialogues with Castro two years ago that led to the release of 3,000 Cuban political prisoners and the visits of hundreds of thousands of Cuban exiles to their homeland. Last year, committee member Carlos Muñiz was shot to death in San Juan, and another member, Eulalio Negrín, was murdered later on the streets of Union City. Officials believe Omega 7 is responsible for the Negrín killing.

A Cuban Spy? One unanswered question about last week's shooting was why García was picked as the victim. One officer at the Cuban mission in New York said that García "was just a gofer. He was not important." But other sources suggested that García was actually a spy sent to counter anti-Castro militants and to keep watch over a Cuban drug ring in Miami. Whatever García's true role, lawmen seemed at a loss in the search for his killers. Without more cooperation from the Cuban community, they may be hard pressed to put an end to the terror of Omega 7.

DENNIS A. WILLIAMS with SUSAN AGREST
and HELENA JOSHEE in New York